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ABSTRACT

Although children of primary school age increasingly maintain friendships autonomously, they still are influenced by their parents. In particular, parents' behaviors supporting peer activities of their children, parental educational attitudes, and parents' own social relationships are expected to be relevant for children's social integration into a network of friends as well as for children's feelings of loneliness. Data were collected on 109 mother-child dyads and 98 father-child dyads in Berlin, Germany. The children attended second- to fifth-grade classrooms. Findings revealed influences of parents' social relationships on children's peer relationships. Unexpectedly, the higher parents assessed the quality of their marital relationship, the fewer friendships their children reported, suggesting an orientation to the family that excludes others. The number of parents' leisure-time friendships was positively associated with the number of children's friendships. Additionally, the leeway that mothers granted to their children for organizing activities with friends, and parents' knowledge of children's friends were positively related to children's friendships. Mothers' authoritarian educational style predicted children's feelings of loneliness. A model was proposed that combines direct influences of parents' relationships on children's social integration as well as indirect influences that are mediated by parenting. (Author/KB)

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POSTER

Family Influences on Children's Peer Relationships: Parents' Social Networks and Educational Attitudes

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Poster presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD), Albuquerque/NM, April 15-18, 1999.

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Abstract

Although children of primary school age increasingly maintain friendships autonomously, they still are influenced by their parents. In particular, parents' behaviors supporting peer activities of their children, parental educational attitudes, and parents' own social relationships are expected to be relevant for children's social integration into a network of friends as well as for children's feelings of loneliness.

Data were collected on 109 mother-child-dyads and 98 father-child dyads in Berlin, Germany. The children attended second- to fifth-grade classrooms.

Analyses show influences of parents' social relationships on children's peer relationships. The higher parents assess the quality of their marital relationship, the fewer friendships their children report. The number of parents' leisure-time friendships is positively associated with the number of children's friendships. Additionally, the leeway that mothers grant to their children for organizing activities with friends, and parents' knowledge of children's friends is positively related to children's friendships. Mothers' authoritarian educational style predicts children's feelings of loneliness.

Finally, a model is proposed that combines direct influences of parents' relationships on children's social integration as well as indirect influences that are mediated by parenting.

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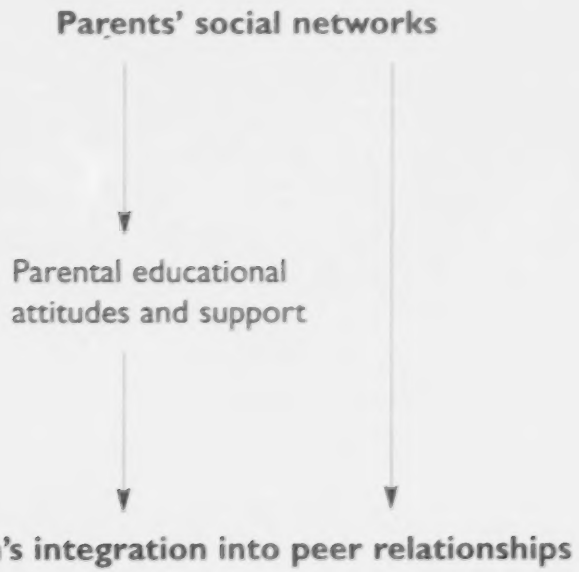
Questions of research

This study aims to improve our understanding of the interwoven direct and indirect ways in which parents' social networks (kin, friends, and spouses), parental educational attitudes (e.g. authoritarian and protective parenting), and parental support of children's friendships (consultation about friendships, leeway for activities with friends, concern and knowledge about friendships) influence children's integration into peer relationships and children's loneliness. The following model proposes a direct effect of parental social relationships on children's friendships and an indirect effect mediated by parents' educational attitudes and parents' support for children's peer relationships.


Parents' social networks
Parental educational attitudes and support
Children's integration into peer relationships

Sample

1. Mother-child dyads (N = 109)

	secondgraders	thirdgraders	fourthgraders	fifthgraders
boys	17	11	7	15
girls	15	16	15	13

About one third of the mothers took the highest German school degree (Abitur).

2. Father-child dyads (N = 98)

	secondgraders	thirdgraders	fourthgraders	fifthgraders
boys	17	12	13	10
girls	12	15	11	8

Nearly half of the fathers took the highest German school degree (Abitur).

Measures

1. Parents' social integration

Number of leisure-time friends (social network)

mothers: m = 2.67; sd = 2.94
fathers: m = 2.05; sd = 2.61

Number of kin relationships within the social network

mothers: m = 1.36; sd = 1.95
fathers: m = 1.01; sd = 1.50

Marital satisfaction (Hahlweg et al., 1982)

mutuality

mothers: m = 30.11; sd = 4.71; 10 items; alpha = .79
fathers: m = 30.63; sd = 4.82; 10 items; alpha = .83

quarreling

mothers: m = 15.28; sd = 4.11; 10 items; alpha = .83
fathers: m = 15.97; sd = 4.39; 10 items; alpha = .85

happiness of marital relationship

mothers: m = 4.89; sd = 0.89
fathers: m = 4.88; sd = 0.85

2. Parenting

2.1 Parents' support for children's friendships

Consultation about children's friendships

mothers: m = 14.60; sd = 3.65; 3 items; alpha = .64
fathers: m = 13.03; sd = 3.86; 3 items; alpha = .73

Room for action (leeway for children's friendships)

mothers: m = 9.15; sd = 2.88; 3 items; alpha = .70
fathers: m = 9.44; sd = 2.75; 3 items; alpha = .61

Knowledge of friends (concern about children's friendships)
(children's and parents' agreements about children's friends)

mothers: m = 2.19; sd = 0.86
fathers: m = 1.95; sd = 0.99

2.2 Educational attitudes

Authoritarian parenting (Schneewind et al., 1985)

mother-daughter: m = 18.08; sd = 4.07; 8 items; alpha = .80
mother-son: m = 17.99; sd = 3.72; 8 items; alpha = .74
father-daughter: m = 18.61; sd = 3.79; 8 items; alpha = .79
father-son: m = 19.57; sd = 3.09; 8 items; alpha = .66

Protection (Schneewind et al., 1985)

mother-daughter: m = 21.70; sd = 4.67; 9 items; alpha = .77
mother-son: m = 19.42; sd = 4.55; 8 items; alpha = .76
father-daughter: m = 18.34; sd = 4.19; 8 items; alpha = .76
father-son: m = 20.39; sd = 4.27; 8 items; alpha = .81

Influence of the self-experienced parenting style (Schneewind et al., 1985)

mother-daughter: m = 22.22; sd = 6.17; 9 items; alpha = .92
mother-son: m = 21.05; sd = 7.22; 9 items; alpha = .95
father-daughter: m = 17.81; sd = 4.89; 8 items; alpha = .87
father-son: m = 20.25; sd = 5.94; 9 items; alpha = .93

3. Children's social integration

Number of reciprocated good and best friends within the classroom
(Interview about friends, Krappmann et al., 1996)

m = 1.30; sd = 1.17

Number of friends outside the classroom
(Interview about friends)

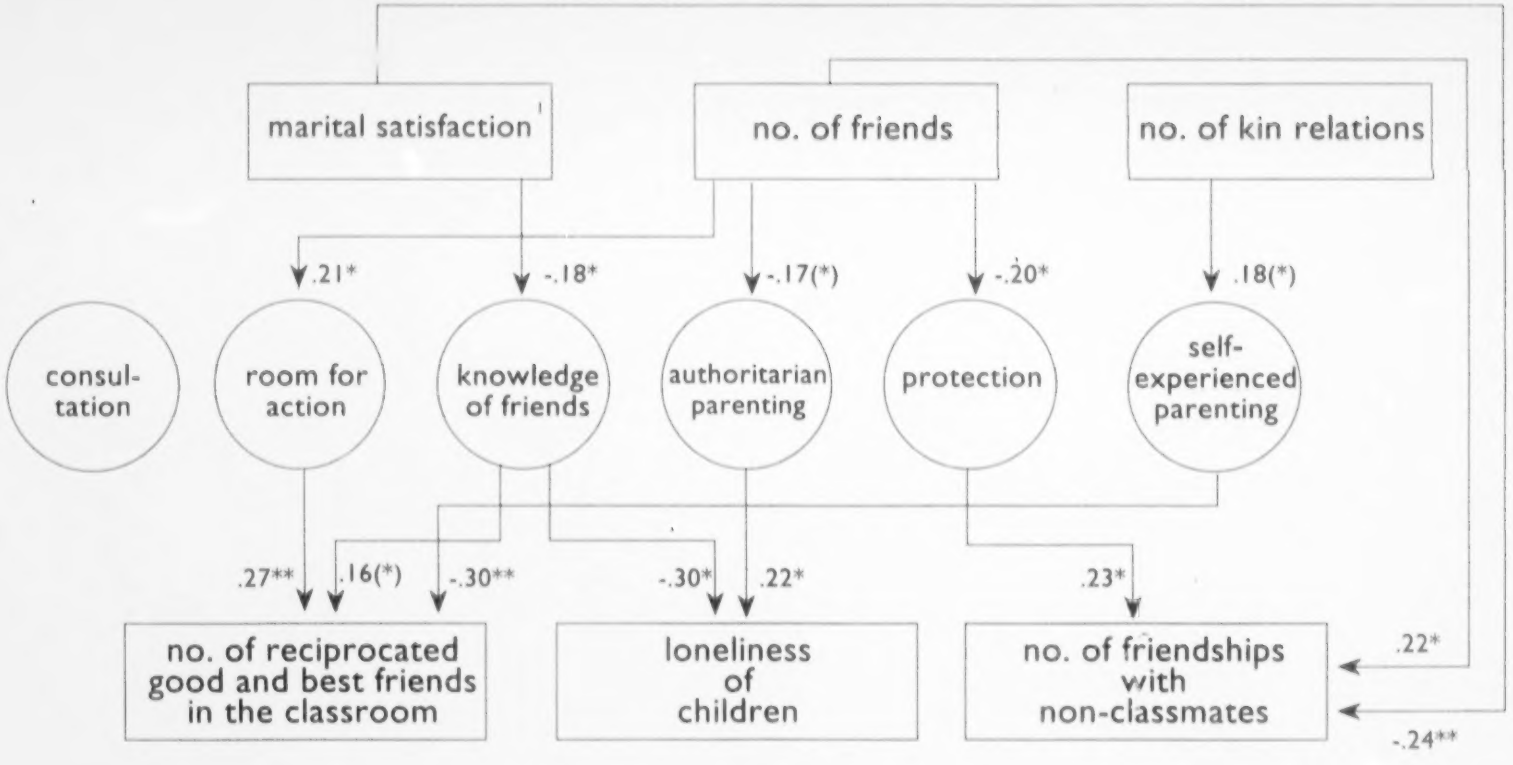
m = 3.61; sd = 3.01

Loneliness (Asher et al., 1984)

m = 30.70; sd = 8.51; 16 items; alpha = .86

Results I: Maternal influence on children and their friendships

(N=109 mother-child dyads)

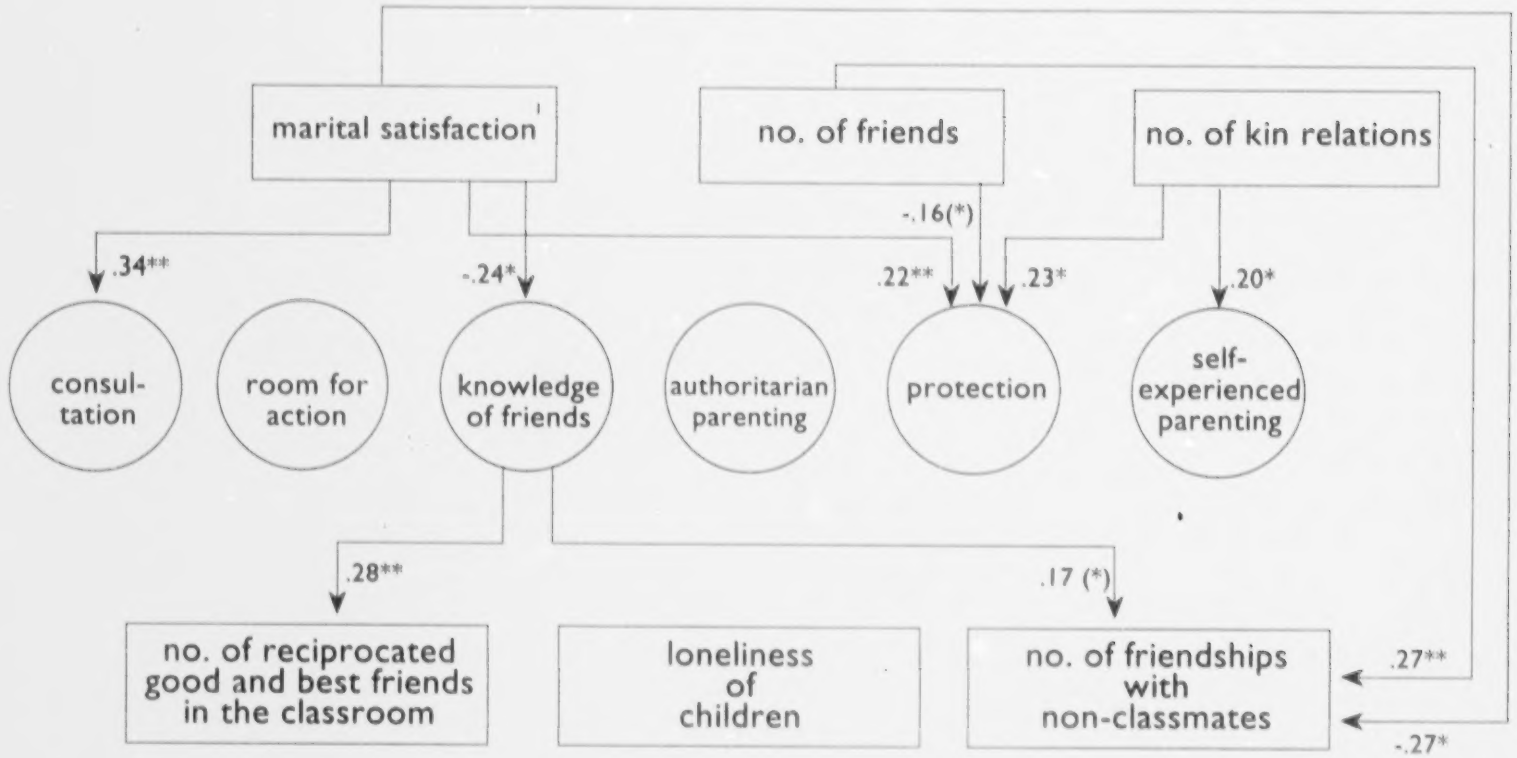


chi square (65) = 65.01, p = 0.48 RMSEA = 0.00; RMR = 0.09; GFI = 0.93; AGFI = 0.88; NNFI = 1.00; IFI = 1.00

[1] The latent variable 'marital satisfaction' was built from the indicators 'mutuality', 'quarreling', and 'happiness of the marital relationship'.

Results II: Paternal influence on children and their friendships

(N=98 father-child dyads)



chi square (68) = 65.79, p = 0.55 RMSEA = 0.00; RMR = 0.08; GFI = 0.91; AGFI = 0.86; NNFI = 1.00; IFI = 1.00

[1] The latent variable 'marital satisfaction' was built from the indicators 'mutuality', 'quarreling', and 'happiness of the marital relationship'.

Discussion

1. Direct relations between parents' and children's social integration

Mothers' and fathers' integration into social networks* is connected to children's social integration in similar ways: The more friendships parents maintain, the more friends their children have outside school. Presumably, children emulate their parents, or parents with friends stimulate their children to make friends with other children. We explain the fact that the parental influence is visible outside school only by the observation that children's own efforts are especially important outside school. Outside school relationshiphs are not supported by the closeness generated in the classroom, but must be established by own activity. Parents' kin relationships, however, are not connected with children's friendships.

Parents reporting a low degree of marital satisfaction have children with many friends outside school. Presumably, having fun with peers and being supported by these peers compensate an unpleasant atmosphere at home. This connection is more easily understandable than the other side of the same correlation: Parents who assess the quality of the marital relationship as being high have children with few friends outside school. This outcome was not anticipated, because one may expect that a harmonious marital relationship is a "secure base" for children when they leave home for play and cooperation with friends. Further enjoyable relationships in the family should promote children's interaction competencies which are needed as well when friendships are established. In view of the opposite result which we found, we conclude that the positive assessment of the marital relationship represents an orientation to the family that excludes others.

2. Indirect relations

The influence of parents' social integration on children and their friends is mediated by parenting. Mothers who maintain many friendships give children much leeway for activities with peers. The more leeway mothers give, the more reciprocated friendships their children have at school. The number of mothers' friendships is negatively related to her authoritarian parenting,

which in another step is related to children's feelings of loneliness. In addition, mothers and fathers with many friends are less protective than other parents. We have to emphasize, that parents with many friends do not neglect their children, because analyses show, that these parents know their children's peers as well as parents with fewer friends.

Fathers with many kin relationships within their social networks tend to protect their children more than other fathers. Parents who stress the importance of kin relationships report that they are influenced by the style of parenting which they themselves have experienced in childhood. All in all, parents' extensive relationships with kin, in particular with their own parents and parents-in-law, predict a more traditional and restrictive parenting style. In mother-child dyads this kind of parenting is connected to fewer reciprocated good and best friendships of children at school.

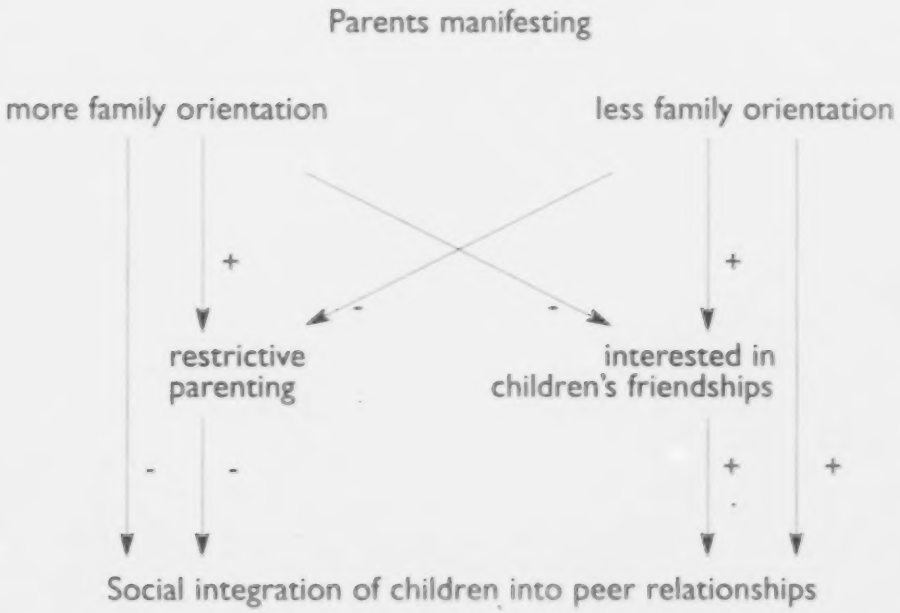
Parents' marital satisfaction is negatively associated with their knowledge of their children's friends. This lack of interest concerning children's friends is related to fewer reciprocated friendships at school (mother-child dyads and father-child dyads), with fewer friendships outside school (father-child dyads), and with increased feelings of loneliness (mother-child dyads). Thus, again it seems that marital satisfaction is associated with an attractive but also restrictive family life, e.g. these fathers are more protective and more engaged in consultations about children's friendships. Since consultation and protection is highly correlated ($r = .40$, $p < .01$) we assume that these fathers, when friendships are discussed, do not encourage their children to make friends.

3. *Proposed model of interpretation*

The proposed model juxtaposes parents who manifest a strong orientation to family life with parents who show less family orientation. On the one side, we have family-oriented parents who are restricting their children's integration into peer relationships, because they involve their children in intensive family activities. Additionally, the emphasis on family life (harmonious marital relationship, many kin relationships, fewer friends) seems to be connected with more restrictive parenting (less room for activities, authoritarian parenting, protection, acceptance of the self-experienced parenting style) and less interest in children's friendships (little

knowledge of children's friends). Both aspects, family orientation as well as restrictive parenting and less interest in children's friendships, predict a weak integration of children into peer relationships and feelings of loneliness. On the other side, we have parents who are less or not exclusively oriented to family. Their friendships seem to be a model for their children. Presumably, they encourage their children to make friends. Additionally, their parental behaviors seem to be less restrictive and more interested in children's friendships. Both behavioral aspects apparently are contributing to a better integration of their children into peer relationships [1].

Model of interpretation



[1] Only one of 22 significant paths in the structural equitation models does not fit the model. It is the path indicating that the more mothers are behave protectively, the more friends their children have outside school. Analyses show that this result mainly refers to mothers with older boys. Probably these mothers know that their sons need friends and they support friendships in a protective athmosphere at home.

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